ON BEING A MEMBER IN BAD STANDING ---------- ELLIOTT #2012

What fun & profit to read the earliest records of the church (South Congregational UCC, Centerville, MA) of which Loree and I have been members for five years!...This thinksheet grows out of that (that reading and that membership-experience) vis-a-vis a phrase I often encounter in church meetings and meetings of the church council: "a member in good standing."

1. Many churchly phrases have a curiously pleasant old ring (not to say old smell, like that in many an old church). The original meaning may have been forgotten (which is true also of many Biblical words and phrases), but one feels onself to be on the side at least of the angels (if not exactly of God) in using and enjoying the antique wordage. One of these phrases is "a member in good standing," which has come now in many churches to mean merely "a member."

2. Geo. Washington died two years after our congregation started as a mission of West Parish Church, founded in 1717 in Barnstable, MA. Both congregations are in the Town of Barnstable, which used to require you to be "a member in good standing" of either of the two churches in order to vote in TOWN meetings; of course you couldn't vote in CHURCH meetings if you weren't "a member in good standing."

3. So what was "a member in BAD standing"? Somebody who could vote neither in CHURCH meetings nor in TOWN meetings because judged by your congregation (whichever of the two) to be derelict in duties to God and/or community. If you'd sinned (sinning being defined--as the U.S. Supreme Court defines the law of the land--as a continuous process by the church council, the particular congregation's ruling body), your clear duty was to repent and make such amends as said council laid upon you. Repentance took the form of confession before the congregation (then later, in a more laidback period, before the church council)--which confession sprang you instantly from "in BAD standing" to "in GOOD standing," so both your ecclesial and your civil franchise was instantly restored. Church and town power was not to be exercised by the irresponsible, for that way lay a sag in public morals, an erosion of civic righteousness and of the sense of proper pride in being "a good citizen" with all the rights and privileges pertaining thereto, and a drag on innovation toward the Kingdom of God.

4. As for churchly duties, the minimum was regular worship-attendance and regular church-support (in labor and/or kind and/or money). Any failure in these duties required written explanation to the council; and failure so to write, or the rejection of the excuse, meant you were, as it were, half-out, "a member in bad standing" who could not vote. Thus the church protected itself against a false resurrection of corpses (ie, members virtually dead to the church) converging on a church meeting to assure that the church stay dead, ie, not change. The wisdom in this church law continues to be evidenced: in our and other old Congregational churches, time and again innovative mission action is killed by church meetings filled with folks you see only when there's something to vote against! This quenches the Spirit and dampens the spirits of those who want the church to be the Church, in action for God in community and world. (The Eternal is dishonored by pretending that human custom is eternal.)

5. I'm moving that our church restore the rule that if you miss, unexcusedly, three Sunday worships in succession, your name is automatically moved from "GOOD standing" to "BAD standing" membership. OVER

Or at least I'm feeling more frequently moved so to move: what's restraining me is (1) the operational difficulty of taking the roll (in contradistinction to merely counting the back of heads for the "attendance roll") every Sunday worship ("Who knows everybody?"), and (2) the fact that "voting with your feet," ie, not attending, is now a common way of "making a statement" about your negative stance vis-a-vis the present clergy/laity administration/programming, so that some of those who care the most about the Kingdom of God express their caring by their ABSENCE!

6. Objection (1) can be met by the common present practice of signing in by pews during the "Peace" or at some other point in the service. A church can thus automatically know who's present/absent. Objection (2) is tougher: withdrawal (ie, passive resistance) is now so common a violation of community that few speak out against it, though there's much more to be said for hanging in there & fighting for your convictions humbly enough, openly enough, to let the Spirit work for or against the way you see things (ie, active resistance).

7. If a church restores the "member in bad standing" category, what is to be its functional meaning? I'm esp. concerned that it mean at least that the bad-standing member not be permitted to vote in church meetings: bad-standing members are a demonic drag on getting anything new done for God and the community and the world! Traditionally, however, bad standing meant you were also forbidden the Supper, Holy Communion, the Eucharist, the Mystery: that's what "Eucharistic discipline" meant--and still means in some churches. Protestantism in general looked and looks askance at Eucharistic discipline, seeing it more as a tool of priestly control-power than as either a stricture in the interest of church purity or an educational device to stir the wandering toward penitence and return. (Another question is whether "the altar" should ever be restricted ("closed communion") to those in the particular congregation or denomination; the growing practice almost everywhere in Christendom is to invite "all those in good standing in any Christian church" (or some such words).

8. Yesterday (the last Sunday in '85) Loree and I took to worship a couple who were very active in Shuller's "glass cathedral" till they moved to the Cape last week. When after worship I commented on the size-contrast between that church and ours, they said "No, it was a small church in the sense that we are all in small groups where we feel real belonging" (ecclesiolae in ecclesiam, kosmikoi en cosmo, little churches--churchlets?--making up the big church). Social-sanctional discipline is built-in: if you're absent from, say, the Bethel Bible Study session, everybody in your group knows it.... What's important here is that everyone absent (no matter the size of the church) should be contacted, in some personal way enabling response, before the next Sunday.

9. The three-Sunday rule, common in Congregationalism of old, happens to correspond with the psychosocial research behind the strategies of L.E.A.D. Consultants, directed by Tim Savage, whose PhD showed that by the fourth Sunday's absence, the person/family has evolved a different way of spending Sunday morning (in another church or in some nonchurch activity). Ironically, "bad standing" correllates with bad ministering (by clergy and laity) when there's reason for anyone to say "They didn't even miss me! They don't even know that I exist, and don't care!"

10. Another and more important dimension here is the inner life (and so outer life) of the strayer, who's apt not to know the difference between emotion and devotion, "getting something out" and giving.